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## Blood Revenge and Violent Mobilization

### Evidence from the Chechen Wars

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Despite a considerable amount of anthropological research into the phenomena of blood revenge and blood feud, little is known about the role of blood revenge as a cause of violent mobilization in irregular wars. Blood revenge, or the practice of seeking blood retribution for a grave offense committed against an individual or his or her relatives, has been practiced since the dawn of humankind. In recent years, it has functioned as an important apolitical mechanism in encouraging violent mobilization in irregular wars, including against foreigners.

Scholars in disciplines as varied as anthropology, sociology, psychology, and criminology have explored the phenomenon of blood revenge in depth. In his seminal work on blood revenge among Yanomamo tribes of the Amazon basin, Napoleon Chagnon stated that “[b]lood revenge is one of the most commonly cited causes of violence and warfare in tribal societies.”

<sup>1</sup> Some scholars have examined the practice of blood revenge in conflict-ridden societies, including those in Albania, Chechnya, Yemen, and Colombia.<sup>2</sup> Overall, however, the literature on political violence and conflict studies has yet to offer a comprehensive, systematic empirical account of how blood revenge manifests itself in contemporary irregular wars.

This study takes a step toward filling this gap by presenting a detailed empirical analysis of the role of blood revenge as a cause of violent mobilization in irregular wars. In contrast to the literature on

blood revenge in tribal or premodern warfare and on blood revenge as a form of social violence and social justice,<sup>3</sup> this study argues that blood revenge has much wider application in conflict environments than scholars generally have assumed. We empirically ground this proposition in a contextualized and systematic examination of blood revenge practices during the anti-Russian insurgencies in Chechnya from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s.

We begin by conceptualizing the term “blood revenge.” Drawing insights from the extensive literature on blood revenge in anthropology, ethnography, and sociology, we then examine the theoretical implications of blood revenge for the discipline of conflict studies. This section also analyzes the importance of blood revenge in several major present-day irregular wars, including those in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and Somalia. Next, we categorize blood revenge as an apolitical, grievance-driven cause of violent mobilization in irregular wars. These conceptual and theoretical sections are followed by a section on methods and data. The subsequent empirical sections present our case study and report our findings on the practice of blood revenge among Chechens during the First Chechen War (1994–96) and the Second Chechnya War (1999–present day) in Russia’s North Caucasus region.

## **Conceptualizing Blood Revenge**

The words “revenge,” “feud,” “vengeance,” “retribution,” and “retaliation” have many meanings. In contrast, the term “blood revenge” typically refers to a more specific, context-bound form of “revenge”: a desire to kill an offender or his<sup>4</sup> (usually patrilineally delineated) male relatives in retaliation for a grave offense committed against oneself or one’s relatives. Traditionally, blood revenge is an individual act of revenge against either the perpetrator of an offense or a member of a group associated with the offender through blood kinship. But, as this article illustrates, when would-be

avengers are unable to identify or locate a group associated with the offender through blood kinship, they may exact blood revenge on the narrowest possible group which they are able to associate with the offender. We therefore propose a broader definition of blood revenge: specifically, blood revenge is as an individual act of revenge against the perpetrator of an offense, or a member of a group associated with the offender through blood kinship, or against a broader group associated with the offender not necessarily related to him by virtue of blood kinship. Although in this broader understanding, blood revenge is not sought exclusively against the offender's relatives, it does have the same characteristics. In other words, blood revenge has to be individual, reciprocal (in the sense that it is triggered by an offense against oneself or one's relatives), selective (in the sense of selecting the targets of revenge), equivalent (i.e., grounded in the principle of "eye-for-an-eye"), and resulting in, or at least with the intention of, causing death.

"Blood feud" is a concept closely associated with blood revenge.<sup>5</sup> Whereas blood revenge is normally understood as a single act of revenge, blood feud is a process likely to encompass multiple acts of blood revenge. Indeed, blood feud is a process involving at least one act of blood revenge. In practice, it involves a series of acts of blood revenge. Karina Schumann and Michael Ross consider blood feuds "retaliatory cycles of violence between warring families or clans."<sup>6</sup> Unlike blood revenge, which may end with the death or punishment of an offender, a blood feud may endure for generations, with one act of blood revenge being followed by a retaliatory act of revenge in an endless cycle of tit-for-tat violence. As Trevor Dean observed in his study of an identical South Italian custom, "Vendetta was an obligation on kinsmen. That obligation did not die with an injured part."<sup>7</sup>

The custom of blood revenge exhibits common characteristics across societies that practice it. First, it is closely tied to the notion of honor. Described in anthropological studies as an inseparable attribute of honor in honorific cultures,<sup>8</sup> blood revenge is, most of all, exacted to defend or restore one's honor.<sup>9</sup> As Jon Elster observed, "Honor...is central in all feuding societies."<sup>10</sup> A source of pride and

virtue in honorific cultures, it is “an attribute of free, independent men, not of women, slaves, servants, or other ‘small men’.”<sup>11</sup> The failure to exact blood revenge in honorific cultures is tantamount to the loss of one’s honor. Describing the Palestinian custom of taking revenge, Sharon Lang explains that “[t]o avenge the murder of a close kinsman is honorable; to fail to do so is dishonorable.”<sup>12</sup> The honor-based role of blood revenge in many cultures is socially sanctioned.<sup>13</sup> For example, “[i]n Corsica, the man who has not avenged his father, an assassinated relative or a deceived daughter can no longer appear in public. Nobody speaks to him; he has to remain silent.”<sup>14</sup> Blood revenge is thus obligatory. Failure to pursue to it may result in social sanctions targeting not only the individual who failed to retaliate, but also his entire kinship group. Writing about Iraq, Patricio Asfura-Heim states that an individual’s “[f]ailure to fulfill the obligation of *’thar* [blood revenge] badly damages the group’s reputation; it is a loss of honor that weakens the group vis-à-vis other groups.”<sup>15</sup>

Second, blood revenge is reciprocal, as discussed in ethnographic work of Adamson Hoebel and Geoffrey MacCormack.<sup>16</sup> The principle of reciprocity is also embedded in contemporary blood-revenge practices. For example, it is a component of Albania’s customary code *Kanun*, which sanctions blood revenge for spilt blood.<sup>17</sup> It is also encoded in the Albanian saying “Blood is never lost,” the similar Chechen saying “Chechens never forgive blood,” and the Arab saying “Blood demands blood.”

Third, blood revenge is grounded in the notion of equivalence. The biblical principle of an eye-for-an-eye, which is used to justify most acts of blood revenge, prescribes that one life be taken for each life lost or for an offense of similar gravity, such as rape or grievous injury. Islamic criminal jurisprudence explicitly recognizes the concept of equal—and therefore just—retaliation (*qisas*) applied against the offender but not his relatives.<sup>18</sup> Writing about blood revenge in medieval Iceland and England, William Miller explained that “[t]aking ten lives for one was not feud; it was either war or anarchy.”<sup>19</sup> Peter Waldmann observed that in Montenegro, “one kept track of the number of dead on both sides (in order to avoid mistakes).”<sup>20</sup>

Historically, the practice of blood feud has thrived in tribal societies that lack a central political authority or centralized state structures as a “mechanism of social control and the maintenance of a balance of power.”<sup>21</sup> The practice of blood feud has largely disappeared in societies that have undergone industrial development, the establishment of centralized government, the strengthening of state authority, or the decomposition of tribal or clan societies. Nevertheless, it continues to survive and thrive in some parts of the world. In addition to the tribes of the Amazon basin<sup>22</sup> and other hunter-gatherer indigenous communities of South and Central America, sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia and Oceania,<sup>23</sup> blood revenge is currently practiced in the Pakhtun (Pashtun) areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan,<sup>24</sup> Sunni tribal areas in Iraq,<sup>25</sup> parts of Yemen,<sup>26</sup> vast swathes of Somalia,<sup>27</sup> and southeast Turkey,<sup>28</sup> as well as among the northern Albanians (Ghegs) of Albania and Kosovo,<sup>29</sup> Bedouin tribes in North Africa,<sup>30</sup> and Chechens and Ingush in the northeastern Caucasus.<sup>31</sup> Even in those societies that have undergone industrialization and experienced living under a centralized authority, such as Albanians under communism and Iraqi tribes under the rule of the Baath Party, the retreat of the state resulted in the revival of blood revenge.

### **Blood Revenge and Violent Conflict**

Anthropological research on blood revenge has focused primarily on its practice as an intra-group phenomenon occurring within one (sub)ethnic group or among a group of locally based families, clans, or tribes. As seen from this perspective, “[f]euds...are conflicts that occur within the same political community.”<sup>32</sup> In general, this scholarship has not examined cases of blood revenge against foreigners.

**scholars studying irregular wars have on occasion discussed the phenomena of revenge, feuds, retribution, and reprisal, using these terms interchangeably.<sup>33</sup> In addition, several recent case studies have mention blood revenge, blood feud, and related phenomena, An empirical**

**analysis by Karen Ericksen and Heather Horton of instances of blood feud around the world—a hitherto single quantitative study on the phenomenon—concluded that there seems to be “no relationship” between blood feuds and warfare. Rather, “feuding was found to be associated primarily with concerns about premarital chastity and mode of marriage.”<sup>34</sup> No study has so far focused on the role of blood feud as a cause of violent mobilization in irregular wars.**

For instance, David Kilcullen argues that “violent or foreign-based intervention” in Afghanistan “creates...a desire for revenge when local people are killed or are dishonored by the intervening outsiders’ presence.”<sup>35</sup> Additionally, he shows that many members of the Taliban fighting against U.S. and other coalition troops following the invasion in 2001 were not religious zealots, but tribesmen seeking blood revenge on behalf of family members who were killed in air raids or drone strikes or who were forced to abandon their homes and livestock in the wake of bombings or other war-related violence. According to Kilcullen, “Religious extremism and support for the old Taliban regime are rarer motivations, according to Afghan intelligence officers and local officials with whom I discussed this; desire for revenge (*badal*) and anger arising from the loss of relatives in the fighting or from killing of bystanders and destruction of property through ‘collateral damage’ are more common.”<sup>36</sup>

The practice of *badal* among Pakhtun tribes in Afghanistan is encoded in the customary law of Pakhtunwali, and it is considered both a social norm and a moral obligation.<sup>37</sup> Qasim Mahdi refers to *badal* as the “cornerstone” of local customary law and defines it as “an action taken to avenge death, or when the honor of a woman has been involved.”<sup>38</sup> Mahdi writes that “if a man is well-protected enough to escape *badal* himself, it is extremely doubtful that the protection can be extended to his kin, or the successive generations, who would constitute legitimate targets of *badal*.”<sup>39</sup> This explanation illustrates that when Pakhtun tribesmen cannot exact revenge on the individual(s) directly responsible for, say, the death of a family member killed in an air strike, they may turn their sights on those with

less direct responsibility—for example, anyone associated with the international presence in the country or Afghan armed forces within reach. Thomas Barfield notes that, according to the principles of *badal*, “[i]f one man murdered another, the murdered man’s kin were collectively obligated to seek blood revenge. Similarly the murderer’s kin were collectively responsible for his act (and might even be targets in revenge killings), even though they had no direct role in it.”<sup>40</sup> Sean Maloney claims that “blood feuds involving RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades] and AK-47s are not necessarily Taliban violence, nor are they necessarily insurgent violence.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the rise of insurgent violence in Kandahar Province from 2003 to 2007 was, to a significant extent, a response to the heavy-handed policies of the Afghan government and the indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas by NATO forces.<sup>42</sup>

In Iraq the custom of blood revenge assumed a different form after the 2003 U.S. invasion in 2003. In his analysis of the causes of violent mobilization in Iraq's so-called Sunni triangle in the period 2004–05, William McCallister writes: “There is nothing immoral about killing an individual so long as he is not a kinsman or an ally. An unprotected individual can be killed without fear of reprisal from his kinship group. An individual belonging to a clan or tribe is protected, since his death would incur the enmity of the extended family. To maintain a credible deterrent capability, the tribal sheikh must be prepared to avenge each and every injury.”<sup>43</sup>

Therefore, the failure sheikhs to avenge the deaths of tribesmen killed in raids or bombing attacks directly undermined their authority., forcing them to conduct retaliatory attacks on coalition troops and Iraqi authorities. Roel Meijer argues that the atrocities and indiscriminate violence committed by the U.S. military in Sunni areas of Iraq, as well as its general disrespect for local traditions, “transformed the concept of blood revenge (*tha’r*), basically a tribal term that has no Islamic connotation, into a principle of international war by stating that, ‘we will avenge every Iraqi and Muslim anywhere, not only in Iraq.’”<sup>44</sup> According to Meijer, “In the chaotic and lawless circumstances of the American



occupation blood revenge had become the only means to uphold the honor and dignity of the clan as it was impossible to have recourse to a court where compensation could be demanded from the Americans who were responsible for death of family members.”<sup>45</sup> Meijer dates the start of anti-American protests in Fallujah in 2004 to the desire of local tribesmen’s desire to exact blood revenge for injustices inflicted on them by U.S. troops.<sup>46</sup> Asfura-Heim argues that the 2014 takeover of Iraq’s Sunni areas by Islamic State (IS) militants was greatly facilitated by blood feuds between local Sunni and Shiite tribes. Such feuds prompted Sunnis to assist IS against the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad and the predominantly Shiite-manned Iraqi security forces.<sup>47</sup>

The practice of blood revenge has also played a prominent role in Yemen’s civil violence.<sup>48</sup> One report states that 4,698 people were killed in *tha’r*-related violence between pro-government Sunni tribes and anti-government Shiite tribes from 1998 to 2008.<sup>49</sup> In all, more than 10,000 Yemenis died in blood feuds during that period.<sup>50</sup> The widespread practice of blood revenge between the Sunni government and Shiite insurgents, wrote Sarah Phillips, “led to cycles of inter-tribe violence spanning generations and dominating the political and economic landscape.”<sup>51</sup>

The practice of blood revenge (*godob*) in Somalia has been described as fundamental in both fueling inter-clan feuds and contributing to the cycle of violence that has ravaged the country since the early 1990s.<sup>52</sup> Jama Mohamed identified blood revenge as the “most common cause” of warfare in contemporary Somalia.<sup>53</sup> Although the number of verifiable reports on blood revenge against African Union troops stationed in Somalia are limited, blood feuds between Somalia’s warring factions and clans occur regularly.<sup>54</sup>

The Afghan and Iraqi examples of blood revenge discussed above illustrate that, in some instances, the practice of blood revenge may be extended to targeting external belligerents,. Because failure to seek blood revenge would undermine the status and position of the afflicted individual or group within the honor-based society, it is in the interest of that individual or group’s to pursue the

offenders at any cost. In some cases, the result is a vicious cycle of attacks and counterattacks.

Eventually, groups of tribesmen with no political or religious motivations may join one of the principal belligerents of the conflict, fight alongside them to exact blood revenge.<sup>55</sup>

### **Blood Revenge in the Typology of Causes of Violent Mobilization**

When considering whether join an irregular war, individuals are usually driven by a variety of motives.<sup>56</sup> Scholarship on the causes of violent mobilization has posited a variety of possible incentives, which are often difficult to disentangle.<sup>57</sup> This scholarship has been heavily influenced by the “greed versus grievance” paradigm.<sup>58</sup> The grievances-based dimension of participation in irregular wars prioritizes sociopolitical and socioeconomic explanations for their decision to mobilize. For example, Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler propose four major categories of grievances: “ethnic or religious hatred, political oppression, political exclusion and economic inequality.”<sup>59</sup> These major categories continue to dominate the current research on causes of irregular wars.

While research on grievances has dominated studies on political violence since World War II, the economic incentives for participation in irregular and civil wars have attracted more attention since the 1960s.<sup>60</sup> Originating with Mancur Olson’s collective action theory and dubbed “greed-based motivations” material incentives for participation in conflicts are based on an individual’s tendency to carefully weigh the costs and benefits of his or her prospective behavior;<sup>61</sup> that is, personal incentive is the key to understanding an individual’s behavior. For example, group members will hesitate to act in line with what appears to be their common interest if they do not expect to gain personally. Should the prospective costs of risky behavior outweigh the prospective benefits on an individual level, the individual, being essentially rational and self-interested, will refrain from taking collective action.

In accordance with the above discussion, we categorize blood revenge as an underexplored type

of grievance. The categorization of blood revenge in the typology of causes of violent mobilization highlights its apolitical, nonmaterial character in irregular wars, distinguishing it from other kinds of grievances. Unlike other kinds of grievances, blood revenge encourages individual rather than collective mobilization. And in contrast to popular grievances stemming from economic and political discrimination, blood revenge is more context-bound and does not lead to large-scale violent mobilization. Only those individuals directly affected by violence, or whose relatives have been affected by it, resort to blood revenge.

## **Data and Methods**

This article draws empirical insights from thirty-eight in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted from 2007 to 2013 with former Chechen insurgents and witnesses in Chechnya's two wars. Twenty-one of the interviewees participated in the armed resistance. Seventeen others were witnesses who did not personally participate in the hostilities. The data collected from the interviews pertain to the periods 1994–96 and 1999–2006.

Given the lack of security in present-day Chechnya and sensitivities around the subject of blood revenge,<sup>62</sup> the bulk of the ethnographic fieldwork for this study was conducted within Chechen émigré communities in Istanbul (September 2007, May 2009, December 2011, and September 2012); Vienna (November 2007); London (November 2011); Copenhagen (September 2012); and Oslo (March 2013). Again for security reasons, participants consented to being interviewed only on the condition of strict confidentiality. For this reason, we conceal their identities in this study.

We used snowballing and referral nonprobabilistic methods to select interview participants. The sample includes predominantly Chechen males between the ages of thirty-four and sixty-five, originating from different parts of the republic. Given the nature of the sample and the limited number

of participants, this study does not claim statistical representativeness.<sup>63</sup> Nor does it seek to offer deterministic proof of a causal relationship between blood revenge and violent mobilization in irregular wars. Rather, it aims to provide empirically supported ethnographic evidence on the practices of blood revenge during the First and Second Chechen Wars.

### **Chechen Society: Getting Mad and Getting Even**

Despite the ongoing processes of modernization and urbanization in Chechnya, traditional sociocultural values and archaic patterns of social organization remain largely intact among the Chechen people. These patterns are evident in the persistence of three key phenomena: clan identity, the concept of honor, and the custom of blood revenge.

Chechnya is a clan society. Chechens identify themselves as belonging to one of roughly 150 *teips* or large clans, which are sometimes referred to as tribes. *Teips* are subdivided into several branches (*gars*), the latter being split into patronymic families (*nekyes*). *Nekyes*, in turn, are subdivided into groups of related families spanning up to seven generations (*shchin-nakhs*), which are further subdivided into nuclear families (*dözals*). The ongoing transformation of Chechnya's clan system has meant that smaller in-groups, such as *gars* and *nekyes*, where people still have personalized knowledge of one other, have replaced *teips* as an important source of collective identity.<sup>64</sup>

Norms of local customary law (*adat*), which are centered on the ethical codex of male honor (*k' onakhalla*), continue to play a considerable role in the lives of ordinary Chechens. The archaic code of honor constitutes the cornerstone of Chechen society, regulating relationships between males and females, those among different age groups, and so on. In gender-related terms, the honor of an unwed female rests in her premarital chastity and that of a married female in her fidelity to her husband and his family. In contrast, the perception of male honor is largely unrelated to the patriarchal notion of

sexuality. Rather, it is linked primarily to three characteristics: courage, hospitality, and generosity. In addition, a male's honor lies in his ability to safeguard the honor of the women related to him and to his clan, as well as his ability to provide financially for his close relatives and to keep them safe.

A male's honor is also tied to his ability to avenge an offense inflicted against him or his (patrilineally defined) relatives—male or female. Severe offenses historically include extreme verbal humiliation, physical injury leading to incapacity or death, and especially manslaughter or rape.<sup>65</sup> Such blood insults can lead to the declaration of a blood feud (*ch'ir*) by the individual directly offended or by one or more of his or her male relatives. The restoration of an offended individual's honor (or that of his clan), requires the offense be “washed off” with the blood of either the culprit, his brothers, or his cousins.

**The inability of an offended individual or his clan to avenge a blood insult may produce opprobrium both inside and outside the clan. Failure to retaliate is considered a sign of weakness or cowardice. This notion of “losing face” applies not only to the would-be avenger, but also to the clan of which he or she is a member.** The initial act of retaliation transforms the offender into the offended, creating a vicious cycle of reciprocal violence that can last for generations, because blood feuds have no expiration date.<sup>66</sup>

### **Blood Feud as a Cause of Violent Mobilization in Chechnya**

Numerous scholarly accounts identified blood revenge–based retaliation as an important cause of violent mobilization in Chechnya's two wars.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, the majority of journalistic reports stressed the role of Chechens' clan-based social organization and sociocultural values in shaping the nature and dynamics of those wars. As one American journalist covering the First Chechen War stated in 1995, “Now that Russia has unleashed a war in which hundreds—

perhaps thousands—of Chechens have died, the concept of blood revenge has become a national mantra. A family that has lost a son, a daughter, a father or mother to the war must seek to avenge those deaths.”<sup>68</sup>

Our interviews with former Chechen insurgents confirmed this observation, highlighting the need to restore their individual and clan honor through blood revenge as a key reason for their violent mobilization.<sup>69</sup> Failure to do so would have been too heavy of a burden to bear.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, many interviewees referred to the social context of such failure and their fear of being considered cowardly and weak.<sup>71</sup> As one veteran of the First Chechen War stated, “After what the [Russian] soldiers did to my household, it wasn’t possible for me to stay home and pretend nothing had happened. I couldn’t have looked people in the eye.”<sup>72</sup> In the words of a veteran of the Second Chechen War, “one’s failure to avenge would be tantamount to losing face in your own eyes and in the eyes of the people. You’d simply cease to be a Chechen anymore.”<sup>73</sup>

As mentioned earlier, scholarship on the causes of violent mobilization in irregular wars suggests that people rarely mobilize for only one reason. But in our interviews with former insurgents, blood revenge often featured as the sole motive. In some instances, a would-be avenger might have also had a political motivation for joining the fight, such as support for Chechen independence. In other instances, he might have mobilized in spite of his political convictions or lack thereof. Regardless, blood revenge was enough a motive to prompt the decision to participate in the armed conflict.<sup>74</sup>

The same was true for interviewees who decided to join the conflict in spite of their apolitical stance or disapproval of Chechen separatism. In fact, prior to the Russian invasion in late 1994 and the bloody confrontation that followed, Chechen society was not united in its effort to gain independence from Moscow. Sociological surveys conducted before the outbreak of hostilities that showed a relatively high percentage of Chechens wanted their country to remain part of Russia. One survey, conducted in Chechnya in mid-1991, indicated that about 60 percent of the respondents wanted their

republic to stay within the Soviet Union/Russia. Only around twenty-four percent favored full independence.<sup>75</sup> Since the early 1990s, many Chechens have remained deeply divided over their support for—or opposition to—Chechnya’s separatist elites. In the past, many Chechens in Chechnya as well as members of the Chechen diaspora in Europe routinely accused these elites not only of infighting, corruption, and clientelism, but of sparking wars and bringing the Chechen people to the brink of physical extinction because of their myopic policies with regard to Moscow.<sup>76</sup>

Participants in our interviews stressed their initially apolitical position or ambivalence regarding the idea of Chechen statehood and the Chechen separatist elites of the period.<sup>77</sup> As one war veteran lamented, “No one really wins in a war, when you lose your relatives, your loved ones....The fact that [Chechen leader Dzhokhar] Dudayev and [Russian President Boris] Yeltsin had problems reaching an agreement didn’t mean we had to kill each other. We could have agreed, since there were many Chechens who could still benefit from access to Russian markets, to Russia....When the war broke out, many young people were euphoric about expelling the Russians, but there were lots of mature and thinking folks who resented those [political elites] in Grozny as much as those in Moscow.”<sup>78</sup>

These interviewees eventually joined the ranks of the insurgents not because of their support for Chechen separatism, but in spite of it. These interviewees were driven instead by their deep determination to retaliate following an act of violence by Russian forces against a relative, whether it was murder or another form of blood insult.<sup>79</sup>

After the start of the Second Chechen War in the fall of 1999, outrage among Chechens critical of the republic’s political and military elites appears to have been even more intense than it had been on the eve of the first war.<sup>80</sup> Through their constant quarreling, Chechen elites squandered the republic’s chances of reinforcing its de facto sovereignty during the 1996–99 interwar period. As a result of the Chechen-led jihadist invasion of Dagestan in August 1999, they were also widely blamed by the local

population for providing Moscow with a pretext to launch a new and even more devastating war.<sup>81</sup>

Importantly, most Chechens disapproved of the newly adopted ideology of Salafism,<sup>82</sup> which had been gradually replacing Chechen nationalism as the leading ideology among leaders of the Chechen insurgency.<sup>83</sup>

There was widespread consensus among our interviewees that it was the need for blood revenge against Russian troops (and, more recently, against their Chechen proxies) that ultimately prompted thousands of Chechens who were initially apolitical, skeptical of Salafism, or even anti-separatist to resort to violence.<sup>84</sup> Interviews also revealed that, for many, support for the idea of Chechen independence did not automatically push them to mobilize. Valuing family survival over national independence, some Chechens sought to avoid the mounting hostilities entirely, choosing instead to stay behind and care for their loved ones.<sup>85</sup> Against this background, it was a relative's murder by incumbent forces that pushed would-be avengers to mobilize. As one former veteran stated, "In the beginning, no one was really willing to go to war....After all, we all had families, households, elderly parents to care for. But when your younger brother is killed in an air strike, what are you supposed to do? Stay home and watch TV? For us Chechens, there was no other choice but to take up arms and seek revenge."<sup>86</sup> Another explained, "Of course, it'd be great to have an independent country. And [since the 1990s] many have sacrificed their lives for its sake, as has been done many times in our [Chechen] history....But there is a difference between fighting for independence or fighting to avenge a murdered relative in whose veins your own blood circulates. The former is praiseworthy, but it's still a matter of personal choice....The latter is a must for a true Chechen."<sup>87</sup>

Violent mobilization often has a snowball-like effect. This has certainly been true Chechnya, where the murder or fatal injury of one individual has, in some cases, led to the mobilization of



multiple avengers from within the same *nekye* or family. Interviewees stated that the raping of Chechen women, in particular, has generated high numbers of avengers, ranging from five to ten individuals per incident.<sup>88</sup> Consequently, this cycle of offense and retaliation provided for a nearly continuous influx of fresh recruits into the insurgency.<sup>89</sup> This was especially true in the patriarchal mountainous areas in the south of the country, where violent mobilization evolved along clan (*gar, nekye*) lines, and thus generated more avengers.<sup>90</sup> In urban areas, violent mobilization for the sake of individual retaliation tended to be increasingly confined to nuclear families, producing smaller numbers of avengers.<sup>91</sup>

As discussed earlier, blood revenge has historically targeted either the perpetrator of an act of violence or his patrilineally delineated male relatives—members of the same clan, all of whom can be identified. The practice has been subject to strict rules, which stipulate that targeting those unrelated to the culprit through blood kinship should be avoided at all cost. The deployment of Russian army units in Chechnya changed the situation inasmuch as would-be avengers were less capable of identifying and locating the actual offenders and their relatives. Nevertheless, locals' efforts to trace the latter's whereabouts and target them for revenge did not cease. Rather, they adapted to the conditions on the ground.

Interviewees noted that Chechen males primarily sought to exact revenge on members of Russian units based near their villages.<sup>92</sup> Although they would have preferred to attack those directly responsible for an offense, identifying and locating them often proved difficult. As Mairbek Vatchagaev, a Chechen historian and eyewitness to the conflict, noted, whenever there was the slightest chance of identifying the culprits, "[Chechens] continued to search for them, targeting closely dislocated garrisons...Even after the war, there were some cases when they [offenders] were located in Russia and assassinated in their apartments.....Megalitres [of vodka] were spilled to get the addresses of those in charge of (mop-up) operations in one village or another. A lot of attention was paid to finding those who would betray their fellow fighters."<sup>93</sup>

In contrast to the difficulty of identifying and locating individual offenders, seeking blood revenge against entire Russian units proved easier. *Zachistkas* (mop-ups), locally conducted military operations, and artillery shelling were the most common sources of indiscriminate violence by Russian units. **Importantly, these forms of violence were relatively easily ascribed by local Chechens to the garrisons of the Russian army, which were dislocated close to their villages and which were usually responsible for targeting Chechens. Therefore, in the aftermath of an offense, blood revenge-driven violence tended to be as much selective as actual information allowed it to be, with avengers retaliating against the narrowest possible group of offenders they were capable of identifying. Accordingly, the majority of blood revenge-driven violence was directed against those Russian units that were held responsible by local Chechens for committing particular offenses or were perceived by locals as the actual culprits of such offenses.**<sup>94</sup>

Nevertheless, most avengers soon came to regard all Chechnya-based Russian troops as potential targets of blood revenge-driven violence. According to our interviewees, two factors explain this change: (1) the increased flow of avengers into established insurgent units and (2) the avengers' gradual submission to the ideology prevailing within these units—predominantly ethnonationalist in the First Chechen War and Salafism in the Second Chechen War.<sup>95</sup> As one former insurgent stated, “If you’re a young guy and you join a *jamaat* [a Salafi-jihadi group] and find yourself encircled [in your daily life] by dozens of brothers in arms, your new family, it’s natural that over time you embrace their ideology.”<sup>96</sup>

Unable to target offenders on their own, individual avengers joined established insurgent groups.<sup>97</sup> As members of these units, most avengers underwent gradual ideological indoctrination, increasingly associating themselves with the political goals of their group.<sup>98</sup> Over time, this in-group ideological indoctrination led them to target Russian troops as a whole, moving them beyond their

initial aim of avenging an individual, apolitical offense. Yet despite citing political motivations for their violent engagement, such as Chechen independence or the establishment of a Salafist theocracy in the region, many interviewees still cited the need for blood revenge as the most immediate cause of their violent mobilization.<sup>99</sup>

### **Blood Feud and the Outcomes of the Chechen Wars**

Blood revenge–driven mass mobilization played an immense role in the Chechen insurgents’ de facto victory over the Russian military in the First Chechen War. Accurate statistical data on the role of blood revenge in Chechen campaigns are, however, highly difficult to obtain given the impossibility of ensuring sample representativeness among former insurgents. Nevertheless, qualitative data collected for this study suggest that the blood revenge served as an effective cause of violent mobilization for thousands of Chechen males.

Evidence suggests that the majority of Chechen insurgent forces from 1994 to 1996 consisted of volunteers who joined the fighting in the latter stages of the conflict. According to some estimates, Chechen combatants, predominantly those serving in the Chechen army and other formal armed units (e.g., the so-called Presidential Guard and the Abkhaz Battalion), numbered up to 4,000 men at the onset of the war. This figure skyrocketed shortly after the start of the hostilities, reaching 12,000 to 18,000 during the latter phases of the armed conflict.<sup>100</sup> This increase ran parallel with the growing scope of indiscriminate violence deployed by the Russian military, and the resulting increase in the number of combatant and noncombatant casualties—producing an increasingly high number of committed fighters from among local men.<sup>101</sup> The data imply that Chechen separatist authorities made no effort to recruit males into the insurgency movement, nor did they force Chechen males to join insurgent units.<sup>102</sup> Large-scale mobilization into rebel ranks, which occurred largely without forced recruitment, suggests that individual recruits were highly motivated to join the fighting. Given that the

majority of recruits originated from Chechnya's mountainous areas—which are more socially conservative, clan-based, and notorious for their reliance on blood revenge—rather than from urban areas and the republic's lowlands, blood revenge could be expected to figure prominently among other causes of violent mobilization. This conclusion has been confirmed by numerous interviewees, who acknowledged that blood revenge was the primary motivation for many Chechen men who volunteered in the war effort as the conflict escalated.

The Second Chechen War displayed many of the same features, including the crucial role of blood revenge-based violent mobilization. In this conflict, blood revenge appears to have also stemmed the tide of the insurgency, although this time in the opposite direction. In spite of—or because of—the massive use of indiscriminate violence in the early 2000s, the Russian military failed to break the backbone of the local resistance movement. And as in the first war, high casualties resulting from the Russians' extensive use of indiscriminate violence generated more avengers. Consequently, as a Russian combat general reported from Chechnya as late as in 2004, Russian troops were “so busy just trying to ensure their own security” that they “almost never can counter the resurgent guerrillas.”<sup>103</sup>

The gradual deployment since the early 2000s of pro-Russian Chechen paramilitary forces, *kadyrovtsy*,<sup>104</sup> as part of what came to be known as Moscow's policy of Chechenization, replaced the Russian military as the main counterinsurgency force in the republic. The use of *kadyrovtsy* units transformed the conflict into a civil war.<sup>105</sup> Deployed by Moscow and their Chechen allies en masse against insurgents, their (alleged) supporters, and relatives in sweeping and atrocious counterinsurgency operations and attacks that claimed hundreds of lives,<sup>106</sup> *kadyrovtsy*, pro-Moscow Chechen authorities, and their relatives soon found themselves trapped in vicious cycles of blood feuds with insurgents, their relatives, and the families of their (alleged) supporters.<sup>107</sup> As a Chechen political scientist has explained, Chechenization gradually “pitched a [Chechen] family against a family, a clan against a clan....Dragged into blood feuds with their neighbors and fellow countrymen, the Chechens

[*kadyrovtsy*'s relatives] now had no other choice than to fight this war until the very end," turning into Moscow's loyal subjects.<sup>108</sup> In consequence, *kadyrovtsy* soon turned into an increasingly fierce counterinsurgent force, backed by dozens of thousands of their relatives and loyal to Moscow as the main guarantor of their survival.<sup>109</sup> This meant that the Russian military's hypothetical withdrawal from the republic as a result of a failed counterinsurgency would inevitably lead to large-scale physical liquidation of *kadyrovtsy*, their relatives, and pro-Moscow Chechen authorities at the hands insurgents, their relatives, and the relatives of the insurgents' (alleged) supporters.<sup>110</sup> By and large, the custom of blood revenge, practiced by both pro-insurgent and pro-Moscow Chechens, tore at Chechnya's social fabric, polarizing the population and creating a determined force loyal to Moscow that has stemmed the tide of the local insurgency. Today, Chechnya—the erstwhile epicenter of insurgency since the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s—is one of the safest areas of the North Caucasus, experiencing less violence than Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, and periodically even tiny Ingushetia.<sup>111</sup> **The gradual decline of the Chechnya-based insurgency during the Second Chechen War was nevertheless due to the incumbent's instrumentalization of the custom of blood revenge by instigating intra-Chechen hostilities rather than the ineffectiveness of the custom itself.**

## Conclusion

The Chechen practice of blood revenge is similar to the same practice elsewhere in the world. Blood revenge is understood in Chechnya as deeply embedded in individual, family, and clan honor. It is always reciprocal. Following the Russian military intervention in 1994, blood revenge began to be widely used by thousands of Chechens in their quest to avenge their murdered, injured, or raped relatives, and to restore their individual and clan honor. Blood revenge is thus not confined to the realm of communal infighting, but it may also involve out-group members.

In many cases, the need to exact blood revenge took precedence over an individual's political views, or lack thereof. Chechen males previously skeptical of or ambivalent toward the idea of Chechen independence were impelled to avenge following a relative's murder. Others sought to "wash off" a deeply felt offense, despite previous desires of avoiding the hostilities. Similarly, for many latent supporters of Chechen independence, an act of offense inflicted upon themselves or their relatives was the immediate cause of their violent mobilization. Although many Chechens were driven to violence by their personal and apolitical need to retaliate, their subsequent membership in insurgent groups led them to embrace the dominant ideology of those insurgent organizations. Avengers provided for the constant flow of manpower to insurgent groups.

As a rule, would-be avengers sought to exact blood revenge against the actual culprits of offense. Yet inability to identify and localize culprits prompted avengers to shift their focus to the narrowest circle of individuals associated with a particular offense: a military unit. Would-be avengers unable to link a particular offense to an offender sought to exact revenge on the Russian military as a whole, a shift that was also affected by avengers' ideological indoctrination as members of insurgent organizations. Wartime anonymity thus did not lead to the abandonment of the practice of blood revenge. Rather, the enemy image was broadened to include an entire military force.

The findings of this article suggest that blood revenge is an effective, albeit largely underexplored, cause of violent mobilization in irregular wars. Foreign entities engaged in irregular wars, such as the United States, NATO, and Russia, continue to underestimate the potential for violent mobilization posed by blood revenge. Yet a better understanding of how blood revenge generates violent mobilization may help to grasp the visceral causes of armed conflict in societies that still practice this age-old custom.

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4. As a rule, women and children are not targets of blood revenge.
  5. During insurgencies, blood revenge is practiced by the indigenous population against an external invading force such as a foreign military or against an incumbent government, and it is likely to consist of individual acts of vengeance. In contrast, when blood taking occurs as part of an internal conflict within indigenous communities, a single act of blood revenge can lead to reciprocal acts of blood taking—that is, a blood feud.
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73. Interview with “Ibrahim,” Moscow, September 2009.
74. Many of our interviewees were able to distinguish blood revenge–based motivation from other causes of their violent mobilization. In a variety of situations, blood revenge served as an immediate

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cause of violent mobilization, which eventually combined with more political motivations, such as an individual's genuine support for Chechen independence. This implies that blood revenge-based retaliation has motivated not only individuals who were initially apolitical or skeptical of the idea of Chechen separatism, but also those who were latent supporters of Chechen separatism but preferred to keep a low profile during the initial stage of the armed conflict. Importantly, even pro-independence interviewees were able to distinguish the desire for individual blood revenge-centered retaliation from political incentives to mobilize.

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76. Valerii Tishkov, *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

77. The latter category predominantly included those from the republic's northern areas. See interviews with eyewitnesses of the First Chechen War, 2007–13.

78. Interview with "Musa," Istanbul, September 2012.

79. Interviews with former insurgents.

80. Jean-François Ratelle, "Chechnya: Moscow's Revenge," *Harvard International Review*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Fall 2000), p. 16; and interviews with eyewitnesses of the Second Chechen War, 2007–13.

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82. Salafism is a fundamentalist branch of Sunni Islam. It condemns non-Islamic ideological innovations and pre-Islamic practices, calling for a return to the "pure" tradition of the early Islamic



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period. “Salafi jihadism” and “jihadism” are terms widely used to describe the ideology of jihadists, who themselves are militarized adherents of this branch of Islam. Jihadists consider jihad a holy war to defend and expand Islam.

83. Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, “The New Chechen Jihad: Militant Wahhabism as a Radical Movement and a Source of Suicide Terrorism in Post-War Chechen Society,” *Democracy and Security*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (January 2006), pp. 103–155; and interviews with eyewitnesses of the Second Chechen War.

84. Interviews with eyewitnesses of the First and Second Chechen Wars, 2007–13.

85. Ibid.

86. Interview with “Idris,” London, November 2011.

87. Interview with “Aslan,” Istanbul, May 2009.

88. When an avenger or a politically driven insurgent is killed, additional individuals from within his or her clan mobilized to retaliate, creating a vicious cycle of violence.

89. Interviews with former insurgents.

90. Emil A. Souleimanov, “Jihad or Security? Understanding the Jihadization of Chechen Insurgency through Recruitment into Jihadist Units,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2015), pp. 86–105.

91. As a by-product of this fact, insurgents from mountainous areas were particularly numerous in the Chechen insurgency movement.

92. Interviews with eyewitnesses of the First and Second Chechen Wars.

93. Online interview with Mairbek Vatchagaev, November 7, 2014.

94. Interviews with former insurgents and eyewitnesses of the First and Second Chechen Wars, 2007–13.

95. For a detailed analysis of the ideological indoctrination to which new recruits in Chechen

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nationalist or jihadist insurgent units were exposed, see, for instance, Souleimanov and Aliyev, *The Individual Disengagement of Avengers, Nationalists, and Jihadists*.

96. Interview with “Idris.”

97. Identifying, locating, and killing targets of blood revenge was often beyond the capacity of individual avengers. Therefore, support and assistance from their relatives was fundamental. During both Chechen conflicts, groups of relatives often formed tight-knit armed units consisting of five to twelve members, tasked with tracking and targeting either the direct perpetrator of an offense or the military unit held collectively responsible for committing a blood insult. These largely familial units either operated on their own or were gradually incorporated into established insurgent units. In the initial stage of their violent mobilization, these kinship-based units usually avoided incorporation into established insurgent units that were part of the ethno-separatist or Salafism-imbued resistance. Therefore, such groups of relatives were on average more immune to insurgent groups’ ideologies than individual avengers who joined insurgent groups on their own.

98. This transformation of the motives for violent engagement, largely unidentifiable in macrolevel studies, remains heavily underresearched in current scholarship on political violence in blood revenge-dominated conflict zones, producing distorted accounts of militants’ incentives to mobilize. For a detailed analysis of the causes of individual (dis)engagement in the Chechen wars, see Souleimanov and Aliyev, *The Individual Disengagement of Avengers, Nationalists, and Jihadists*.

99. Interviews with former insurgents.

100. For estimates of the number of Chechen combatants in the First Chechen War, see Souleimanov, *An Endless War*, pp. 103–104. See also M. Yusupov, “Chechnya,” in V. Tishkov and Y. Filippova, eds., *Mezhetnicheskie otnosheniya i konflikty v postsovetskikh gosudarstvakh* [Inter-ethnic relations and conflicts in post-Soviet states] (Moscow: Conflict Research and Resolution Center, 2001), p. 240.

101. Blurred boundaries between combatants and noncombatants make it difficult to obtain exact

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numbers of Chechen combatants.

102. As Chechen veterans and eyewitnesses of the First Chechen War explained in interviews, this is partly because of the relatively limited ability of Chechen separatist authorities to control the situation on the ground and partly because intensive voluntary recruitment into insurgent groups diminished the need to carry out forceful recruitment.

103. Quoted in Mark Kramer, “The Perils of Counterinsurgency: Russia’s War in Chechnya,” *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Winter 2004/05), pp. 5–63, at p. 9.

104. The term *kadyrovtsy* derives from the family name of the the first chief of Chechnya’s pro-Moscow government, Akhmat Kadyrov. Kadyrov was installed after the country’s reoccupation in 1999–2000. His son Ramzan was the leader of Chechnya’s pro-Moscow paramilitary forces and became president following his father’s assassination in 2004.

105. Robert Bruce Ware, “Chechenization: Ironies and Intricacies,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (May 2009), p. 157.

106. Jamestown Foundation, “Rights Activists: Kadyrovtsy Are Chechnya’s Main Problem” (Washington, D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, December 31, 2005).

107. Emil Souleimanov, “Russian Chechnya Policy: ‘Chechenization’ Turning into ‘Kadyrovization?’” *Central Asia–Caucasus Analyst*, May 31, 2006, <http://old.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/3976>; and Emil A. Souleimanov and Huseyn Aliyev, “Asymmetry of Values, Indigenous Forces, and Incumbent Success in Counterinsurgency: Evidence from Chechnya,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, forthcoming.

108. Interview with Abdullah Istamulov, Prague, June 24, 2014.

109. Interviews with eyewitnesses of the Second Chechen War.

110. Emil Souleimanov, “An Ethnography of Counterinsurgency: Kadyrovtsy and Russia’s Policy of Chechenization,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (March 2015), pp. 91–114.

111. Emil Souleimanov, “Dagestan: The Emerging Core of the North Caucasus Insurgency,” *Central*

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*Asia–Caucasus Analyst*, September 29, 2010, <http://old.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5415>; and Emil Souleimanov, “Kabardino-Balkaria Risks Becoming New Insurgency Hotspot,” *Central Asia–Caucasus Analyst*, March 2, 2011, <http://old.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5507>.